

Exploration of Cross-Cultural Couples' Marital Adjustment: Iranian American Women Married to European American Men

Sara Garrow Ruebelt^{1,5} · Hemla Singaravelu² · Manijeh Daneshpour³ · Carrie M. Brown⁴

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Abstract This article presents a qualitative, phenomenological study which explored cross-cultural marital adjustment among intermarried Iranian American women and their European American husbands. Twelve couples participated in individual and joint interviews. Analysis of the interviews suggests that although cross-cultural differences exist between the couples, these differences were not preventing successful marital adjustment. The interviews revealed that successful marital adjustment relied heavily on certain positive features or “strengths,” which worked as buffers to cross-cultural differences. The findings of this study add to the limited literature on Iranian Americans, intermarriage, and cross-cultural

marital adjustment, and have implications for counselors and marriage and family therapists working with cross-cultural couples.

Keywords Cross-cultural · Intermarriage · Adjustment · Iranian Americans

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, almost 10 % of married couple households included spouses of different races or ethnicities (U.S. Census Bureau 2010a). Some researchers have suggested that intermarried couples have a greater likelihood of encountering problems because of different views, beliefs, value systems, attitudes, and habits compared to couples who are of a similar culture. As the number of intermarriages continues to grow in the U.S. (Romano 2008; Seward 2008; Steil et al. 2009), more researchers are recognizing the importance of investigating topics related to intermarriage, including marital adjustment (Donovan 2004; Durodoye 1994; Seto and Cavallaro 2007; Seward 2008; Steil et al. 2009; Sullivan and Cottone 2006; Tseng et al. 1977; Waldman and Rubalcava 2005).

Many researchers have focused on intermarriages between African Americans and European Americans, as well as between people of different nationalities such as those reported in Hawaii (Fu 2007; Golebiowska 2007). Researchers have also examined the intermarriages of Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans (Qian and Lichter 2011; Wieling 2003). The literature, however, comes short on Middle Easterners in the U.S. who are intermarried with a person of a different ethnic background, and therefore our understanding of Middle Eastern people's and their spouses' marital adjustment, within intermarriage, is limited. The purpose of this study was to explore, qualitatively and phenomenologically, marital adjustment among intermarried Middle Eastern

✉ Sara Garrow Ruebelt
sara.ruebelt@gmail.com

Hemla Singaravelu
hsingaravelu79@webster.edu

Manijeh Daneshpour
mdaneshpour@stcloudstate.edu

Carrie M. Brown
cmbrown@agnesscott.edu

¹ California School of Professional Psychology's Marriage and Family Therapy Program, Alliant International University, 2030 W. El Camino Ave. Suite 200, Sacramento, CA 95833, USA

² Webster University, 470 E. Lockwood Ave, St. Louis, MO 63119, USA

³ St. Cloud State University, 3210 Education Building, 720 Fourth Ave South, St. Cloud, MN 56301, USA

⁴ Agnes Scott College, 141 E. College Avenue, Decatur, GA 30030, USA

⁵ Department of Psychology, University of California Davis, 135 Young Hall - One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616, USA

women in the U.S., specifically Iranian American women, and their European American husbands.

Views of Intermarriage

Intermarriage is defined as a marital relationship that consists of partners who are of different nationalities, cultures, or religions, with or without race as a factor for those differences (Falicov 1995; Hsu 2001; Perel 2000; Sullivan and Cottone 2006). Previously research has generally emphasized the problems faced with intermarriages. As put forth by Romano 2008, intermarried couples will face familial and societal disapproval and will have difficulties particularly with cultural traditions, holidays, parenting, and language barriers. Bhugra and De Silva 2000 conceptualized these sources of difficulties as “macro-cultural,” or characteristics found primarily in societal attitudes, and “micro-cultural,” or individual differences in habits, beliefs, values and customs. Hsu 2001 expresses a similar view, stating that intermarried couples’ relationships may involve additional marital problems stemming from beliefs and traditions that are grounded in their respective culture.

These less-than-optimistic views of intermarriage extend from the marriages themselves to the individual partners in the relationship. Some researchers have posited that people who are intermarried may be choosing to disown their culture, are being rebellious, or are having a cultural identity issue (Atkeson 1970; Chen and Takeuchi 2011; Romano 2008). Steil et al. 2009 suggest that although the growing rate of interracial marriage is often seen as reflecting increased tolerance for diversity, it can also be seen as a place for cultural conflict with implications for the couples and families who are involved.

According to Gains and Liu (Gaines and Liu 2000), although the divorce rates among multicultural/multiracial couples are well above the overall divorce rate in the U.S., many multicultural/multiracial relationships thrive and survive over time. In fact, Root 2001 posits that incompatible differences and problems within intermarriages are in fact quite similar to marriages in which the two people are of similar backgrounds. Those incompatible problems and differences include: loss of respect, unwillingness to compromise, hurtful actions, lack of responsibility, dishonesty, and conflicting values (Root 2001). Researchers have identified intermarriage as something that draws individuals together based on positive commonalities (Morry et al. 2011; Tan and Singh 1995) including values, beliefs, politics, and religion. Hence, intermarried couples that are successful share similar desires and expectations in regards to their commitment to the relationship and their views on the roles of husband and wife (Romano 2008).

Marital Adjustment in Intermarriage

Intercultural marital adjustment refers to being culturally aware of the differences that exist in a marriage and making an effort to understand and compromise to one another’s needs (Tseng et al. 1977). The literature on marital adjustment is limited. However, based on existing research, we know that there are key elements to positive marital adjustment in intercultural marriage. These factors include commitment, sensitivity, cultural appreciation, flexibility, positive self-image, common goals, sense of adventure, sense of humor, and love (Romano 2008), as well as communicating openly and knowing that resiliency is achievable (Bustamante et al. 2011; McFadden 2001; Romano 2008).

Intermarriage can bring new opportunities to elicit both personal and dyadic growth. As McFadden and Moore 2001 suggest, “...as the intercultural partners ascent to ascertain a sense of cultural security in society, they resolve conflict, understand mores, respect values, communicate openly, engage in self-disclosure, accept immersion and nurture companionship” (p. 266). Furthermore, the authors conclude that factors such as a sense of style, communication, and love contribute to achieving a satisfying intercultural marriage, as well as to cultivating positive intimate relationships that encourage being oneself and making a unique contribution to the world. Seward 2008 also noted the positive consequence of intermarriage in the form of increased open-mindedness, noting that open-mindedness is both a cause and effect of intermarriage and that being open-minded suggests an attitude of appreciating difference.

In contradiction to the view that people who are intermarried are betraying their culture, Seward 2008 found that intermarried couples were not rejecting or betraying their host culture but seemed emotionally positive about each other’s culture and challenged the view that people who are intermarried are experiencing identity issues. Her study revealed that as couples negotiate their differences and identities, meaningful realities are socially constructed and couples participate in a third culture building. Third culture building, as Uchida 1997 contends, occurs through the “communication processes which is informed by the couple’s own cultures but transformed into a shared, mutually acceptable system through negotiation and integration” (p.45). Hence, as intercultural couples negotiate their differences, the emergence of a third culture creates stable marriage identities (Seward 2008).

Iranian Americans and Intermarriage

The research on intermarriage between Middle Eastern people and non-Middle Eastern people, and their marital adjustment, is limited. The present study focused on one specific group of Middle Eastern people living in the U.S. – Iranian Americans (women, specifically), and their non-Iranian husbands.

A Brief Demographic Profile of Iranians in the U.S. Due to the Iranian revolution of 1978–1979, many Iranians moved to the U.S. in exile (Saghafi et al. 2012). The population of Iranians in the U.S. increased by 74 % between 1980 and 1990 (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006), and continues to grow. According to the 2010 U. S. Census, there are 470,000 Iranians living in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau 2010b) with more than half residing in California, particularly in the city of Los Angeles with a total of 80,000 Iranians in residence (Hakimzadeh and Dixon 2006; Hanassab and Tidwell 1993). Members of the Iranian American community say that these numbers under-represent the population due to uncertain reporting methods on ancestry and race. Iran is a non-Arab Muslim country, but most people from the United States assume that Iranians are Arab, when in reality, Iranians are Persians and speak Farsi (Henry and Fouad 2007).

A socioeconomic overview of the 2010 U.S. Census revealed that Iranian Americans are among the most educated immigrant groups in the U.S., and they have the highest rate of degree achievement with one in four having a graduate or professional degree (U.S. Census 2010c). As indicated by Jalali 2005, Iranian Americans are quite resilient, as they have been able to adjust and accommodate to the U.S. culture. Jalali 2005 identifies “biculturalization” as the most frequent and ideal mode of adjustment by Iranians since they present both Eastern (i.e., Persian) and Western (i.e., American) sets of behavior and value systems simultaneously.

Iranian parents in the U.S. intend to raise their children based on Iranian cultural values, but they also realize that it is impractical to maintain endogamy in a multicultural/multiethnic society (Frank et al. 2010; Chaichian 1997). According to Chaichian 1997, 30 % of Iranians in the U.S. approve of exogamy, and 36.9 % respect their children’s decision to marry outside the Iranian ethnic population. As such, in the past 20 years intermarriage of Iranian Americans, particularly among second generations, has increased (Bozorgmehr and Douglas 2011; Jalali 2005).

Need for the Present Study

As the rate of Iranian American intermarriages continues to increase, their realities and experiences need further discussion and exploration (Jalali 2005). In spite of the overall growing number of intermarried couples seeking therapy, there is insufficient cohesive information available that can help us understand such couples (Biever et al. 1998; Fu et al. 2001; Thomas et al. 2003; Zhang and Van Hook 2009). Exploring a sub-group within intermarried couples like Iranian Americans and their European American spouses will shed light on the nuances of their relational dynamics. Further, there has not been enough research focusing on what it takes to have a successful intermarriage or a satisfying intercultural relationship, or how to achieve a successful cultural adjustment in an

intercultural relationship (Biever et al. 1998; Bratter and King 2008; Bustamante et al. 2011; Donovan 2004; Thomas et al. 2003; Wong 2009). Information gained by exploring the marital adjustment with this subgroup will provide mental health professionals a stronger knowledge base for conducting therapy with Iranian Americans and their spouses.

Method

Research Design

A phenomenological study was utilized, particularly interpretive phenomenology, to capture the cultural nuances in intermarried couples and understand individuals’ and couples’ narratives of their cross-cultural relationships and marital adjustment. Hence, this study was qualitative in nature of methodology rather than quantitative due to its interest in investigating marital adjustment among intermarried Iranian American women and their European American spouses, a unique issue not explored before in the literature. The overarching research question of the present study was: What is the experience of cross-cultural couples in regards to cross-cultural marital adjustment and marital satisfaction?

The researcher needs to emphasize that her chosen phenomenological design is more aligned with Edmund Heidegger’s approach of phenomenology who proposed that all knowledge originates from people who are already in the world and seeking to understand other people who are already in the world (Lowe and Prowse 2001). The goal of the Heideggerian phenomenological researcher is to explore, describe, and interpret the phenomena under study and through the lenses of the researcher (Leonard 1994). He suggested that there is no such thing as interpretive research free of the judgment or influence of the researcher. Therefore, the researcher’s primary goal in this study was to make meaning of the reality of cross-cultural couples through interpretation. In doing so, the primary researcher identified as being in the world of the participants and the research question and therefore not able to explore the phenomena of cross-cultural adjustment from a purely objective position as she is herself an Iranian woman in a cross-cultural marriage.

The primary researcher was born in Iran but has lived in United States since adolescence. She is married to a European man residing in the United States (her husband is from Germany). Furthermore, the researcher also has lived in a cross-cultural home growing up, as her mother was also born and raised in Tehran while her father was an American from Minnesota. Having parents in a cross-cultural marriage and being in a cross-cultural marriage have undoubtedly influenced the researcher’s interest in pursuing this research. Furthermore, the researcher was curious to learn about successful cross-cultural marital adjustment in similar

intermarriages. She therefore chose to explore what other Iranian-American women and their European-American spouses who identify as being in a satisfying marital relationship have to say about their adjustment experience.

The three frameworks chosen to guide the premise of this study are multiculturalism (Flowers and Richardson 1996), social constructionism (Burr 1995), and acculturation theory (Berry 1990a; Berry 1990b). Multiculturalism was chosen to explore the process of cross-cultural differences and the couple's relationship adjustment by exploring the degree of cultural understanding between the couple. Social constructionism was chosen to offer means of exploration of shared meanings and constructions of ideas in regards to the phenomena of cross-cultural adjustment by the couple; it assumes that the phenomenon is influenced by people, culture and language. Acculturation theory was chosen to explore changes occurring in cultural behaviors, attitudes, and values when two cultures come into contact with each other in the context of a cross-cultural marriage.

Using the above theoretical orientations and frameworks, the primary researcher then chose five specific categories to guide the exploration into each cross-cultural couple's experience: (a) couple's adjustment and adaptation process, (b) couple's relational strength, (c) couple's degree of awareness and understanding of their fundamental cultural differences, (d) couple's experience with construction of shared reality through the integration of their dual realities, and (e) couple's level of acculturation to one another's culture.

Sample and Setting

Most of the previous research had focused on the "struggles" and "problems" of cross-cultural couples, and therefore the primary researcher was not interested in adding to the research literature that have mostly focused on problems and issues faced in intermarriage. Rather, the goal was to contribute to the limited knowledge on the successful and well-adjusted cross-cultural couples in this subgroup and explore their phenomenon of cross-cultural adjustment specific to a sub-group of marriages among Iranian women and their European-American husbands. Therefore, the inclusion criteria for the participants included: self-report of marital satisfaction, married for at least five years, the wife identifies as Iranian American and the husband identifies as Caucasian or European American. The exclusion criteria for the participants included: unmarried couples; couples who had been married less than five years; and couples who had serious conflict, were considering divorce, or were not planning on staying together. The inclusion criteria relied on self-report of the individuals regarding their marital satisfaction and therefore were subject to their own subjective perceptions of contentment. Furthermore, it was assumed that those who have been

married at least five years would have more knowledge on the process of adjustment than newlywed couples.

Participants were recruited via flyers distributed in university libraries, cultural organizations, and on-line listservs specific for the Iranian American community in the northern California region. In addition, letters and e-mail messages were sent to community members including educators, religious leaders, and therapists to solicit participants who met the criteria and were willing to participate in the study. Sample size was determined by data saturation and in this study saturation was achieved by a sample size of twelve couples.

Data Collection Procedure

An informed consent form presenting the title and purpose of the study, voluntary nature of the participation, details of the participation process, risks and benefits as well as possible publication of the results were provided to all participants. A pre-interview was conducted by telephone or e-mail, in which couples were asked to provide their age, racial and ethnic backgrounds, religion, current occupation, relationship history, number of children, income, marital status and duration of marriage, and marital satisfaction. Couples who fit the inclusion criteria were contacted to schedule a face-to-face interview and were provided a copy of the participant letter with information about the researcher, the nature of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and confidentiality.

The face-to-face interviews took place in each couple's home and consisted of three parts: a two to three hour joint interview, and a one-hour "private" individual interview with each spouse. The couple's interview was conducted first, then, couples chose which individual got to do the individual interview first in a private room in their home. The motivation behind administering couple and individual interviews was that the conjoint interview questions helped reveal how the couple relates to one another in relation to the adjustment process while the individual interview questions helped explore the unique experiences of each spouse while facilitating openness and confidentiality of responses.

Twelve intermarried couples (*Iranian-American women and their European-American husbands*) residing in Northern California were interviewed regarding their cross-cultural marital adjustment experience. All participants reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their marriage. All women self-identified as having an Iranian identity. Most women also identified as being Iranian-American, having lived in the United States for more than ten years. All women in the study, except for one, had first-generation Iranian parents. The women in the study ranged in ages from 28 to 70 ($M=47$), and their husbands ranged in age from 28 to 70 ($M=50$). All couples were together for at least five years. Four out of twelve wives and three out of twelve husbands interviewed were married previously, divorced, and were now

in their second marriage. Eleven of the twelve wives and all of the husbands had at least a Bachelor's degree. Ten of the couples identified as having middle socio-economic status while two of the couples identified with being in the upper socioeconomic status. Half of the couples had children while the other half did not. Four of the husbands identified with having no religious affiliation at all, one self-identified as an atheist, one as a member of the Jewish faith, one converted to Islam because of the marriage, and five identified with various branches of Christianity. Six women identified Islam as their religion, while four identified with some types of Christianity (three of them identified as Christian prior to marriage, while one converted after the marriage). One woman identified herself as having no religious affiliation and one woman identified herself as an Atheist.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data collection and data analysis occurs simultaneously in qualitative studies such as phenomenology (Creswell 2003; Marshall and Rossman 1999; Patton 2002). Through the process of immersion, data was analyzed in order to observe and define what does and does not exist in the data (Patton 2002). During the process of coding, meaningful themes in the data emerged and were outlined for further interpretation. The goal was to present the data in a creative, meaningful and accurate manner, thus categorizing rich descriptions. Furthermore, direct quotes of participants became necessary for data analysis and reporting and thus were selected carefully under each major and sub-themes. Because interpretive phenomenological methodology suggests the exploration of lived experiences of participants, the study was open-ended. As a result, the study traveled in various directions depending on what each couple chose to share from their experiences. Benner (1994) offers insight and recommends a set of skills on the interview process of interpretive phenomenology. As suggested by Benner (1994), the interviewer learned to listen to the stories of participants with as little interruption as possible, and the participants were coached to provide narrative accounts of events, situations, feelings and actions.

Keeping the open-ended nature of the interview process in mind, the interviews were conducted in a non-structured manner. These exploratory areas were used as possible research questions, serving only as a "guide" for the interview. The categories explored are as follows: (a) couples' adjustment and adaptation process, (b) couples' relational strength, (c) couples' degree of awareness and understanding of their fundamental cultural differences, (d) couples' experience with construction of shared reality through the integration of their dual realities, and (e) couples' level of acculturation to one another's culture. Research questions addressed the theoretical orientations and frameworks chosen to guide the study.

The interview guide was created based on the understanding of the phenomenological research design procedures provided in Dahl & Boss (2005) and Patton 1990. The interview guide "allows participants to define phenomena for themselves and to describe the conditions, values, and attitudes they believe are relevant to that definition for their own lives" (Dahl and Boss 2005, p. 72); and it includes descriptive data such as in-depth interviewing that requires open-ended questioning of participants and thus entering their realities and making meaning out of their experiences.

A pilot study was conducted with six participants who were either in an Iranian-American intermarriage, Iranian-born, and/or were currently in a cross-cultural relationship and considering marriage. The pilot study assessed the appropriateness and clarity of questions under consideration, and overall face and content validity of the individual and couples' interview guidelines. Modifications of the questions were made based on the findings, therefore generating an overall interview guidelines.

Discovering Major Themes

In qualitative analysis, coding generates brief descriptions that capture the meaning of text (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Open coding allows the researcher to organize the data, create categories and themes, identify patterns, and ultimately report the generated data accurately (Marshall and Rossman 1999). After careful study of each interview transcript, and case notes, the researcher wrote an interpretive summary describing her impression and understanding of each couple's experiences with marital adjustment. The next step was *axial coding*, which may occur concurrently with open coding. Axial coding generates themes and makes connections between categories and subcategories (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Researchers are encouraged "to analyze their data for material that can yield codes that address topics that readers would expect to find, codes that are surprising, and codes that address a larger theoretical perspective in the research" (Creswell 2003, p. 193). In this research, therefore, the coding process consisted of perspectives held by each couple on the topic of cross-cultural adjustment as well as the individual perspectives of the husbands and wives. This study also identified general codes exhibited in various aspects of the adjustment process. These general codes identified both the uniqueness of each response and the common thread that appeared in the cross-cultural marital adjustment. The goal was to pull the data together in new ways as recommended by Creswell 2007. Central phenomena and its context using a logic diagram were used for elucidating themes that resonate with most participants.

Selective coding, the final step, identifies narratives that integrate the categories representing the aspects that impact and influence the central phenomenon (Creswell 2007). Data

analysis of this study records the interaction of both the researcher's and the participants' interpretations of what is relevant and worthwhile for this study, as well as presenting biases that the researcher brings to the study. The researcher includes her own experiences of the interviews and assists the reader to become familiar with the reality of these participants.

During data analysis, emerging themes develop, accentuated by thick descriptions, and generating the researcher's interpretations. Therefore, the data represent a collaborative effort between the researcher and the research participants. Together they reveal the phenomena of cross-cultural adjustment in a cross-cultural marriage.

Verification

To ensure internal validity, the following strategies provided by Creswell 2003 were used:

1. Triangulation of data: Data were collected through multiple sources including audiotape recordings, researcher observations, and case notes created during face to face interviews.
2. Member checking: Participants received a transcript of the interviews. They were invited to modify their story/experience or provide any additional information to clarify or more accurately represent their reality, so that themes represented their held perspectives.
3. Peer examination: Three faculty researchers served as peer examiners reviewing and affirming the reliability of this study.
4. Clarification of researcher bias: At the outset of this study, during the research proposal stage as well as at the discussion and result phase of the study, the researcher clearly presented her own biases and received constructive feedback.

Results

Despite their differences, the cross-cultural couples in this study possessed a variety of "positive" features, which the researchers took the liberty of defining as "strength" characteristics. Strengths – a focus that has often been left out from previous studies or discussions on intercultural marriages – have revealed to act as a buffer to cross-cultural adjustment. The areas of strength defined by the researchers highlight satisfaction and success in cross-cultural marriage. Based upon the sub-categories of the research question and the interview guide, the following areas were addressed in the couples' interviews: *adjustment and adaptation process; marital strengths; degree of awareness and understanding of fundamental cultural differences; experience with construction of*

shared reality through the integration of dual realities; and level of acculturation to one another's culture. From the above categories several major themes were identified and are listed below:

Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Awareness

From the rich descriptions of the qualitative interviews, couples expressed understanding, awareness, acceptance, open-mindedness, non-ethnocentricity, and the willingness to learn new things. This theme coincides with some of the previous literature on intercultural marital adjustment (Seward 2008; Tseng, et al. 1977). The couples had to navigate around their different cultural practices and adapt to their spouse's life, whether it was through acclimatizing to their practices or having an understanding towards their preferences. Further, being aware of differences was identified as the first step followed by being sensitive and accommodating to their differences. Most of the couples demonstrated a heightened level of awareness towards particular aspects of cultural differences, especially in relation to family life. For example, the husbands understood the collectivistic nature of the Iranian culture and the wives understood the individualistic parts of their husband's culture and negotiated around these differences. The husbands discussed having to adjust to the long distance phone calls to extended cousins in Iran and attending multiple Iranian family functions. But through negotiations, the husbands came to understand the cultural importance and personal value of these phone calls and family events to their wives. The wives accommodated to their husband by helping set boundaries and prioritizing the events, which eventually protected their sense of autonomy and independence. The couples were able to describe other differences in the cultural practices and behavior, which demonstrated the couples' level of awareness, understanding, and adaptation.

Creation of Unity and Shared Reality

This is an extension of the cross-cultural adaptation theme, and was expressed as shared meaning through agreements, compromises, and communication about various ideologies. Couples gave examples that demonstrated the development of their unity through communication and compromise. These couples saw themselves as united and their roles in the relationship as equal, indicating they felt it was required from both of them to make compromises and to make an effort to understand the other spouse. Couples shared that their adjustment was influenced by allowing for the discussion of their different realities and ultimately the co-creation and co-construction of a new reality and shared identities. Through

this process, it appears that individual realities were integrated, thus creating a unity that withstands and embraces cultural differences. For example, one husband defined his cross-cultural experience as such:

It is a melding of thoughts and ideas and lots of compromises and lots of understanding on both sides. We need to talk these things out, and I may not be as great at that as I could be, more accepting than questioning. But if you are not “accepting,” then you need to talk these things out, because if you don’t then it’s liable to become a rift there. That will be problematic.

Establishment of Strong Interpersonal Foundation

This was expressed as the formation of bonds through mutual respect, honesty, trust, and loyalty. These couples identified the following characteristics as necessary to their marital adjustment, marital satisfaction and overall happiness: respect, honesty, trust, and loyalty. These couples saw “cultural differences” as a secondary issue to the foundational shared values, representing their strong interpersonal foundations. The participants discussed strengths or positive relational qualities within their marital foundation as a source of enrichment even after identifying cross-cultural differences. Some identified aspects of cross-cultural issues but mentioned dealing with them as they would any other issues in their marriage through mutual respect, communication, compromise, and understanding. Both the husbands’ and wives’ responses revealed that having similarities in beliefs and values, shared communication, mutual respect and understanding, and the willingness to make compromises were necessary in a cross-cultural marriage. For example, one wife shared the following:

I would say culture is secondary. For me, to use culture as an excuse of – or reason to say you don’t get along, is lame. It is a copout. But let me qualify that: I have the benefit of having met someone who is completely open to other cultures. I mean, there are couples who struggle with this, but if you try to get over those things and do look at what you have in common, if you fundamentally respect each other, all the other issues are secondary. The hierarchy of the important things that are critical: it’s respect, and I’d swear culture is secondary.

Two Way Acculturation

This was expressed by adaptation and integration to each other’s cultural worlds and cultural identities, thus creating a “third culture” which incorporates each spouse’s individual identity. In many cases, the couples seem to have acculturated

fairly well to one another’s cultural practices, norms, and customs, especially to those particular aspects of the culture that were important or significant to the partner. For example, the concept of building a third culture and creation of a balance was mentioned in the below quotations by one couple:

Husband:

In our marriage, we may have created such a third culture that has integrated both of our cultural identities; hopefully with being very selective with our choices that pleases us as a couple, but not always makes others happy. For example, we have to be aware mainly of unrealistic expectations of other.

Wife:

Yes, we are always seeking to balance life between our joint cultural expectations. My husband is very independent and self-reliant. My culture is more socially dependant; therefore, we have to be balance that and be more flexible with other’s request.

Tarof The overall aspects of acculturation presented in the study revealed variation within the occurrence of acculturation. The wives identified and adapted to the cultural practices of their husbands prior to marriage, as most wives were going to school or living in the U.S. prior to meeting their husbands. Conversely, the husbands identified a higher degree of acculturation occurring after marriage. Some experienced acculturation to Iranian culture while living in Iran prior to the revolution. For a few, travels to visit the country, even after the Iranian revolution, as was the case of one husband, sparked the process. Many experienced some adaptation and acculturation to the culture through exposure to their wife’s immediate or extended family or Iranian social circles.

A cultural nuance that was highly recognized by the couples in the study is the customary practice of *tarof* in the daily lives of Iranians. The word *tarof*, (ta’arouf) by definition in Persian, literally means “offer.” It is a concept that demonstrates a traditional role play that ensures everyone has the chance to be on equal terms (Burke and Elliott 2008). Although *tarof* can be about politeness, modesty and equality, the competitive practice of *tarof* can sometimes lead to feelings associated with guilt, obligation or imposition. Furthermore, because *tarof* embodies modesty and politeness, it can also present itself in situations whereby one is likely to hold back the truth for the sake of demonstrating politeness. It was a cultural concept addressed to great length by the cross-cultural couples interviewed as it pertains to a style of communication. In this study, aspects of communication in adjustment were discussed as representing the very nature of high-

context versus low-context communication between Iranian women, their families and the American husbands. In other words, many of the couples revealed communication issues with one another, as well as between them and their extended families.

When exploring the concept of *tarof*, it was discovered that most often the husbands had a good understanding of this concept and had developed an association between *tarof* and hospitality. Furthermore, the wives also knew that the concept of *tarof* did not fit very well with Western customs, as it challenged the ideologies of independence and respect for the individual's wants and needs. Most of the couples often tried to assist with or help bridge the acquired understanding to others and to one another. For example, in the narrative below, such understanding is made through a wife to members of her family.

Husband:

I see it more of a way to show hospitality and also a generational thing.

Wife:

For example, when my parents were here to visit, my mom was like, "ask your husband to come and eat," or, "offer him this." And I was like, "okay Mom, it is his house and he knows what he wants to do and if he doesn't want to eat, then he doesn't want to eat." And she was like, "no, maybe he is doing *tarof*."

The husband's understanding of *tarof* as a cultural concept is tied very much to politeness as rendered by particular generations. However, the practice of and the adaptability to a particular cultural norm such as *tarof* may be difficult to achieve as it challenges the nature of one's identity or personality and, ultimately, one's own cultural norms.

Transculturation Another term often used for the individual level of acculturation is transculturation, a term coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1947 to describe the phenomenon of merging and converging cultures (Lull 2000). The concept of transculturation as described by Lull (2000) is a process by which all cultures influence one another and are constantly changing. This concept is not new; Boas 1940 believed that all people acculturate, and originally conceptualized it by saying:

It is not too much to say that there is no people whose customs have developed uninfluenced by foreign culture, that has not borrowed arts and ideas which it has developed in its own way. (Boas 1940, pp. 631-632)

The above description of acculturation indicates a two-way process of change; yet, most of the contemporary literature on acculturation has focused on immigrants and other minorities in response to their contact with the dominant culture. The current study focuses on the two-way acculturation process, which takes place in a cross-cultural marriage and how such acculturation processes can assist in marital adjustment by balancing out the cultural differences that exist between two individuals.

This two-way acculturation process can also be compared to what Bochner 1986 referred to as second culture learning as a social skills model. This second culture learning may be a necessary approach said to "avoid the ethnocentric trap of the adjustment model, since learning a second culture does not necessarily imply abandoning or denigrating the earlier one; and nor does it stigmatize those unable to cope due to lack of learning and training opportunities" (Bochner 1986, p. 350).

Discussion

While the results of this study present specific implications for mental health professionals working with Iranian American women married to European American men, and these findings may not be generalizable to intermarried couples at large, it can provide valuable information for mental health professionals working with intermarried couples when women are from Eastern and Men are from Western cultural context. The implications listed in this section can provide a source of support for clinicians, and are addressed in the following categories: (a) significance of the study as it pertains to clinical practice with Iranian American women/ European American Men intermarried couples, (b) recommendations for greater awareness and understanding by therapists, and (c) clinical insight on working with Iranian American women/ European Americans men couples.

Demographic Data

There was lots of diversity among Iranian women and Euro-American husbands interviewed in this study. These identifiable differences in age, education, career, and religion could potentially impact the role of gender and cultural norms. Additionally the absence or presence of children in these marriages as well as the identification of their current marriage being the first or the second marriage could be considered as having an impact on their experiences with their cross-cultural adjustment. In other words, those who had experiences with raising bi-cultural children provided a great deal of examples in the area of adjustment with balancing both cultural influences or integrating and incorporating both cultural practices, language, traditions etc. However, those couples without children although mentioned various ideas of intention in theory

had not experienced parenthood and were unable contribute to the adjustment process in relation to parenthood,

Regarding religious identification, six out of twelve wives in this study identified as being Muslim; four identified as either Christian, Catholic, or Lutheran while two identified as having no religion or as being an Atheist. Five out of twelve husbands identified as either Christian, Catholic or Lutheran, while another five identified as having no religion affiliation or as an Atheist; one identified himself as a Muslim and another one as Jewish. Those couples who had similar religion identification within their marriage as well as those with differing religious identification within their marriage reported being equally satisfied in their relationships. However, the fact that those who were Christian were married to Euro-American men who also identified as Christians should not be ignored as playing a potential role in the results showing the areas of commonalities and similarities that made other cultural differences secondary since values were identified as being significantly more important in adjusting in intermarriage.

Furthermore, it is important to discuss how variables such race, gender, and age do intersect and influence marriage. Race is not identified as an issue in this study since Iranian-Americans are considered by US Census and identify self as White/Caucasian. Age for the women in the study ranged from 28 to 70 ($M=47$), and their husbands ranged in ages from 28 to 70 ($M=50$). Although the influence of age was not explicitly explored in this study, its potential influence should not be ignored. Gender role was also not explicitly explored in this study however due to shared value system and shared beliefs identified, it is the understanding of the researcher that most couples were aligned with each other's gender role identification.

Researcher's Bias

From the start, the primary researcher revealed that she is an Iranian-born, U.S. immigrant who was raised in a bicultural household; furthermore, she is currently in a cross-cultural marriage. It is with the researcher's understanding that her personal history has a direct correlation with the topic chosen and that her passion and desire for understanding the dynamics of the adjustment process in cross-cultural relationships may influence the study. For these reasons, keeping biases in check has been a goal in this study. Throughout the study and during the duration of the interviews, the researcher kept a journal documenting her own personal reactions and reflections regarding the topics discussed.

During the interviews, the researcher utilized open-ended questions and when necessary the researcher probed for additional clarification and specification. It was also noticed that, at times, when couples were not able to think of situations to discuss or were unsure about what the question was asking they would ask the researcher for examples; as a result,

sometimes the researcher had to give examples based on her personal experiences or refer to experiences mentioned by previous participants. This aspect was particularly recognized when exploring the concept of *tarof*. On occasions, the researcher recognized that although some couples would immediately refer to discussing *tarof* as a cultural concept others would fail to even acknowledge it; therefore, further probing was provided to explore the couple's experience with this cultural phenomenon as to better understand the impact, if any, of this cultural concept.

Researcher feedback was done discretely so as not to influence the participant's responses but to create an opportunity for further exploration. Another example of such discrete reflection in the interview was during discussions about cross-cultural adjustment. Some participants wanted to know what *cross-cultural adjustment* meant and what qualified as *cultural differences*. The researcher provided a general overview of how cultural differences may be perceived by presenting general definitions for these terms. The model for the researcher's definition of culture and cultural differences was based on Triandis et al. (1980) who defined culture as composed of physical and subjective components. Physical culture represents objects while subjective culture represents social structure, values, beliefs, norms and other aspects alike. The above definition of culture suited the current study as it underlined the subjective nature of social structures, values, beliefs, and norms in a cross-cultural marriage.

Another important area to note is that the questions chosen for this study served as an interview guide but were not always followed accordingly in the interview. For example, depending on the couple, the context of the interview or the relational dynamic, the conversation would take new directions and explore new things. Therefore sometimes (in moderation), the researcher felt compelled to review or bring to the couple's attention various areas that they did not get a chance to discuss in certain interviews; consequently, this interview restructuring may have allowed her personal curiosity to structure the interview process at times. One good aspect of verification for biases was done through the transcribing process. The researcher made a habit of transcribing each interview prior to conducting the next interview. This allowed researcher bias to appear and be recognized, and, therefore, prevent the patterns from repeating themselves in the future interviews.

Significance of the Study as it Pertains to Clinical Practice

Despite their differences, Iranian American women/European American men intermarried couples possess a variety of strengths or positive relational qualities which should not be overlooked. Therefore, therapist(s) working with this population should recognize, acknowledge and build on couple's strengths, rather than focusing solely on how to work through

their differences. Previous research has strongly supported the strength-based therapeutic approach when working with cross-cultural couples (Chan and Wethington 1998; Falicov 1995; Giladi-McKelvie 1987; Sullivan and Cottone 2006). As noted, successful adjustment and adaptation can impact marital quality as it relates to creating satisfying relationships (Donovan 2004; Gottman 1994; Gottman et al. 1998; Rohrllich 1988).

Because the exploration of adjustment is a process in intermarriage, therapists can facilitate cross-cultural understanding between various intermarried couples who may be struggling with this process. Based upon the results of the study, it may be helpful to explore the following highlights for successful relationship adjustment with multicultural couples in therapy:

- Couple's level of multicultural understanding, awareness, and acceptance towards one another as well as their level of open-mindedness, non-ethnocentricity, and their willingness to learning new things;
- Couple's desire and commitment to create unity, and shared meaning through agreements, compromises, and communication about various ideologies;
- Couple's establishment of a strong interpersonal foundation and bonds through mutual respect, honesty, trust, and loyalty; and
- Couple's level of acculturation, adaptation, and integration to one another's cultural worlds and cultural identities.

By exploring the above highlights, marriage and family therapists can engage couples to discuss more strength-based features of their relationship rather than focusing completely on conflicts and downfalls. However, without therapists' understanding and awareness of cross-cultural dynamics, intercultural couples will not be successfully served. Saghafi et al. 2012 point to the fact that the knowledge about Iranian Americans in the United States is limited and perhaps even hostile; therefore, in order to effectively and sensitively serve such immigrants, therapists must have a lifelong professional commitment to working on their multicultural competence.

Recommendations for Greater Awareness and Understanding by Therapists

This study further promotes the continuation of multicultural awareness and training for counselors and marriage and family therapists in the field. who are culturally diverse (Olver 2012, Roysirkar, Arredondo, Fuertes, Ponteroto, & Toporek, 2003, Daneshpour 2003). In the past, some researchers have revealed that minority culture populations seeking therapeutic services have encountered professionals who made poor judgments about their experiences. For example, in her study of multicultural Muslim couples, Daneshpour 2003 found that

some multicultural couples “reported working with professionals who made judgments about their relationship problems based on the partners’ cultural and religious differences. These judgments were based upon the assumptions that differences in racial, religion, or cultural background differences always result in relationship difficulties” (p. 67). The current study presents insight on how cross-cultural couples differing in cultural background and even differing religion are not necessarily dealing with relationship difficulties. It is essential that therapists possess awareness, knowledge, and education of working with cross-cultural and multicultural dynamics as to avoid making generalizations (McGoldrick et al. 2005; Sue and Sue 2008). This includes viewing clients as experts of their reality and identity or coming from a not-knowing stance thus clearing judgements and assumptions as counselors and mental health professionals. Thus, clinicians must be informed of the components of their clients’ culture and challenges, as well as the potential strengths pertaining to cross-cultural marriages.

Clinical Insight on Working with Iranian American/European American Couples

When working with any Iranian American population in clinical settings, it is important for professionals to learn about the cultural variations among Iranians and the length of time it takes for these variations to reveal themselves in the couple's relationship. Couples in this study discussed the adjustment process as a gradual journey of understanding the cultural nuances in their relationship that unfolded year after year in the marriage. For many, adjustment has been achieved over a long duration and, for some, with the addition of children to the marriage. Some of the cultural adjustment identified by the majority of couples was related to the degree of family closeness (extended versus nuclear family), cultural temperaments (individualistic versus collectivistic dimensions), cultural expectations of the parents that influenced the marriage (expectations from parents and in-laws), and variations in food and cultural celebrations (exploring likes and dislikes).

Practitioners need to consider the hierarchical structure that exists in traditional Iranian culture as it relates to the different roles family members play. Further, the dimensions of collectivism/individualism and high-context/low-context communication styles (Sue and Sue 2008) are nuances that are central to the lives of such intercultural couples. The high context communication involves using and interpreting messages that are not explicit, minimizing the content of verbal messages, and being sensitive to the social roles of others; many high-context cultures are collectivistic (Hall 2006). Low context cultures’ confrontation about an issue is made in a very direct fashion while a high –context culture prefers indirectness exemplified by

extreme politeness and diplomacy. This aspect of directness versus non-directness in communication relates to another cultural aspect of Persian culture referred to as *tarof*; which discourages directness and encourages the high context communication style of indirectness (Burke and Elliott 2008).

For couple and family therapists working with Iranian Americans, it is recommended they read about Iranian history and culture to explore the various ways immigration or refugee status may impact the couple in therapy. Additionally, practitioners should explore the narrative life story of each individual/couple and draw out the issues important to all clients. Iranian Americans are unique and should not be grouped as one entity; it is therefore essential for therapists working with this population to explore the diversity of backgrounds their clients are representing. For example, there were three Assyrian-Iranian women in the sample of twelve participants interviewed. Assyrians are one of the Christian Denominations represented in Iran. They are one of the members of the larger, older churches and have their own distinctive culture and language (Eden 1979, Eden 1998). The Assyrian-Iranian women in the current study had already balanced life between their Assyrian and Iranian heritages in childhood, and subsequently adapted to American culture as their third layer of acculturation.

The ethnic diversity in Iran is often overlooked and, as a result, so is the diversity within the Iranian American community. However, such important ethnic identity roots are important and should be explored and discussed in therapy in order to reveal the various layers of the Iranian immigrant's identity. It is important for clinicians to acknowledge that not all Iranian American families are alike, and that a variation of cross-cultural issues may present during therapy.

A chapter about Iranian families by Behnaz Jalali in the book *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (McGoldrick et al. 2005) is an informative guide for therapists as it discusses the various waves of Iranian migration to the United States, family structure and relationships, traditional practices and modern Iranian families. However, this information must not be generalized to each case that presents itself in counseling (Jalali 2005). Iran is a rich country with colorful variations in ethnicity, religion and culture, and every region of Iran is known for its unique authenticity. Thus, every case presented in therapy requires an authentic overview so as to not misrepresent the richness of diversity that exists.

Limitations and Future Directions

In respect to the limitations of this study, one recommendation for future research could include expanding the geographic area from which participants are recruited so that the coverage is beyond the northern California region and more inclusive of other areas of the United States. Also, future studies could

offer variations in the participants themselves, perhaps American women married to Iranian men and other unrepresented minority populations like Iranians.

Furthermore, a comparison study that explores the problems that lead cross-cultural couples experience unhappiness or adjustment difficulties with successful cross-cultural outcomes.

Another direction for future research could explore the degree to which various layers of differences and commonalities add to the process of marital adjustment among cross-cultural couples. Researchers could explore whether or not each of these layers or variables, such as religion, ethnicity, race, social class, education, personality, family upbringing, and culture are equally significant in the adjustment process and, if so, to what extent.

With respect to this study, some questions remain to be explored more closely. For example: How much does the cultural difference in particular add to the complexity and challenges of a marriage? How much does a cross-cultural couple's adjustment vary from a non-cross-cultural couple's adjustment? Another area to explore, then, would be the degree to which gender, social class, or other variables add equally or diversely to the adjustment process. In other words, which variables add or multiply to the challenges faced in the adjustment process? For example, does marrying outside one's social class more of a challenge than marrying outside of one's culture or nationally?

Conclusion

The reported experiences of the couples in this study reveal that the couples' shared commonalities and similarities in values and beliefs, overall agreements and unity on issues, mutual respect and understanding serve as contributors to cross-cultural adjustment, and a general healthy or successful adjustment to marriage.

Overall, the findings suggest that aspects contributing to the cross-cultural couples' adjustment are the shared and compatible individual characteristics in context of beliefs and values, such as open mindedness, willingness to compromise, mutual respect and understanding, communication, and acceptance of differences. Previous studies have implied that cross-cultural marriages face many more and deeper adjustment issues specifically related to their "cross-cultural" nature. These studies are, in fact, widely used to discourage cross-cultural unions. This study challenges these assertions. Ultimately, after exploring the lives and experiences of these 12 cross-cultural couples, it is apparent that cross-cultural differences may not hinder healthy relationships. In fact, they can serve to strengthen cross-cultural understandings and human connections.

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